

University, socio-economic history and identity: The Museum of Foreign Debt, a museum without a collection

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Abstract

How did a topic linked to macroeconomics come to be part of the cultural identity of a country and have a museum? The idea of its creation arose in the mid-2001, when a group of graduate students and professors from the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires began to hold meetings and discussing the matter of foreign debt. In 2003, the task on creating "a space to illustrate in a didactic and attractive way the history of Argentine debt" was commenced; initiated by the Managing Council. The first exhibition "Foreign Debt: Never Again" was opened in April, 2005.

This museum was created with the aim – according to the director's thinking – of cooperating in the construction of citizenship in the frame of the historical memory and spreading the problematic of the foreign indebtedness, a topic that identifies all the Argentineans in their daily life. Opened to the general public and to the university students of all faculties, it has a permanent exhibition that is complemented by the resources of comic strips and a series of changing videos. In addition, its center of documentation offers investigators the most complete documentary base on the topic in the country. The important question is: does it allow the visitors who do not have a thorough knowledge of the subject to think about the facts from an objective point of view or does it impose an ideological message on them?

This paper investigates the originality of the topic and analyzes the mission of this museum, in relation to its museological discourse, its contribution to the construction of citizenship and the promotion of critical thinking.

Introduction

"The word museum refers to a place for gathering, keeping and exhibiting collections of objects with common characteristics and, sometimes, historical value. Nevertheless, the background to the exhibit to be displayed at the Ernesto Sábató Cultural Centre, in the basement of Buenos Aires University's School of Economics, is quite peculiar. It is none other than the 125,283 million dollars that Argentina's foreign debt amounts to. There are no bills, of course, but an installation with data and allegories which aim at reminding us that Argentineans were not born with the foreign debt tucked under our arms but, rather, that there were politics and politicians that favored certain sectors at the expense of the majority".

This is the way a journalist from the best selling newspaper in the country commented on the inauguration of the then-new Museum of Argentina's Foreign Debt in 2005 (Demarco 2005).

The idea of its creation arose in mid-2001 and, according to its director, it aimed at diffusing Argentina's Foreign Debt issue among the country's inhabitants and citizens, as well as among the foreigners who come to study an iconic foreign indebtedment process, and at aiding in the construction of citizenship in a historical memory framework. The foreign debt is an issue every Argentinean can relate to on a daily basis.

Its goal is to fulfill one of the cornerstones of the public university, such as university extension, and to strengthen the bond between the University of Buenos Aires' School of Economics and the society it belongs in. It also aims at generating a space for critical reflection while diffusing Argentina's foreign

debt issue, becoming a clear manifestation of the university's social responsibility, which is a part of the Student Welfare Department's vision¹.

In Argentina, issues such as inflation, the foreign debt and country risk, belt-tightening measures, the IMF, and the Paris Club, have been daily conversation topics for decades. Every citizen feels they are qualified to discuss these issues even if they lack academic knowledge about them. This holds true for all social, economic, cultural and professional levels; among friends, relatives, colleagues and, astounding as it may sound, also among strangers – such as a cab driver and his passenger, or a waiter in a bar and a customer.

Has it always been like this? No. While there was certainty about the short and medium-term economic future, the issues we concerned ourselves about were different: political ideologies, education, and even culture.

From idea to realization. The museum's origins and goals

In mid-2001, a team of graduates and faculty members of UBA's School of Economics started meeting to discuss the foreign debt and the amazing ruling about the lawsuit brought by journalist Alejandro Olmos in 1982, claiming that the country's foreign debt should be declared unlawful.

In the aftermath of the December 2001 crisis and the subsequent unforeseen events, the team kept working on this issue, gathering a great deal of material resulting from their research and document information.



Fig. 1 - December 2001 crisis in Argentina. Photo (left): G. Weisinger Cordero, Covers of Argentine newspapers 20 and 21 December 2001. Photo (right): Rodrigo ABD for *La Nación* Newspaper

Created in 2003, the museum was opened to the public in 2005 featuring the exhibit *Foreign Debt: Never Again*,² designed from a script based on Alfredo and Eric Calcagno's book, *La deuda externa explicada a todos (los que tienen que pagarla)* (*The Foreign Debt explained to everyone – who has to pay it*). In 2009 it closed down provisionally due to refurbishment to be re-opened at its new venue in 2010, the country's bicentennial year.

¹ The goals have been set by the museum's authorities.

² The museum opened with an exhibit called: *Foreign Debt: Never Again*, a title which is immediately associated to the book *Never Again*, containing the report by CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons).



Fig. 2 - The museum in 2005 with several spaces of exhibition.
Photo: Museum of Argentine Foreign Debt

Its target visitors are high-school and college students, both local and foreign tourists and the general public.

The exhibit is organized chronologically from the independence period to the present. It does not have a collection, and the museum discourse is made visible through reproductions of graphic and TV media, using iconic objects – some of which have been intervened by artists – to illustrate some topics:

- the first loan requested in 1824, a few years after the country's independence from Spain;
- Argentina's joining the IMF, in 1956;

- the military dictatorship period from 1976 to 1982;
- the Olmos lawsuit and financial speculation (colloquially *bicicleta financiera* – literally: financial bicycle);
- the return to democracy with Raúl Alfonsín's administration (1983–1989), the declaration of default in 1988 and hyperinflation;
- Carlos S. Menem's two administrations: the Brady Plan, the Convertibility Regime;
- analysis of the Alianza administration (1999–2001) and their economic measures – shielding (*blindaje*), megaswap (*megacanje*), banking restrictions (*corralito*), belt-tightening measures;
- the declaration of default by Rodríguez Saá's fleeting administration;
- the end of convertibility in 2002 and economic recovery as of 2003, focusing on the decline of unemployment, the burden of the debt on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the early emergence of a new accumulation pattern.
- A specific thematic room shows the relationship between Argentina and the IMF – given the significance attached to it. In 2006 it was the 50th anniversary of the relationship with this organization and the museum 'celebrated' it by dedicating this room to the event.

In order to develop its museologic and museographic script, the museum got to having five rooms over its first period.

How did an issue linked to macroeconomics get to become a part of a country's cultural identity?

According to García Canclini, culture refers to the “production of phenomena that contribute, through symbolic representation or reelaboration of material structures, to understanding, reproducing or transforming the social system” (GARCÍA CANCLINI 1983)³.

On the other hand, constructing one's identity is a cultural, material and social process all at once. In doing so, individuals define themselves culturally or collectively in an intimate symbolic interaction with others through religion, gender, class, profession, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality, which contributes to specifying individuals and their sense of self.

³ Our own translation.

In 1993, at the II Seminario Latinoamericano sobre Patrimonio Cultural *Cultura, Museos y Política Económica* (II Latin-American Seminar on Cultural Heritage *Culture, Museums and Economic Policy*)⁴, Brazilian professor Ulpiano T. Bezerra de Meneses stated: “For at least one generation Brazilians have not been able to imagine what a day without inflation might be like. In order to survive, such a myriad of habits, mechanisms, practices, expectations – values – developed that it is safe to speak of an ‘inflationary culture’. The freezing of the savings account deposits⁵ (perhaps the most popular financial operation among the Brazilian middle class) for 18 months [caused people to react to such a measure] not just because it made their material lives more difficult, but also because they viewed it as true ‘memory hijacking’, an insult to a past built little by little through the deposits of their meagre savings. Once again, ignoring the cultural implications of economic decisions brought about problems and confusion. [...] In fact, to begin with, two elements which are pervasive in our social existence in both qualitative and quantitative terms, the habitual and the world of labor, are rendered deprived of the benefits of culture.” Argentina saw a similar process to the one described by professor Meneses.

Following Arnold J. Toynbee (1972), if we do not consider the historical background in each case, it becomes impossible to make sense of subsequent events, of contemporary ones.

Economy, culture and identity

The adjective ‘cultural’ is often used with an automatic, objectively positive connotation to indicate something good, respectable, advisable, legitimate and legitimating.

According to Honneth, a well integrated identity depends on three forms of recognition: concern for the individual (which provides self-confidence), respect for his/her rights (which grants self-respect) and appreciation of his/her contributions (which guarantees self-esteem). When an emotional reaction is negative (anger, outrage), it turns into the motivational basis of a struggle for recognition. Disrespect in those three spheres may be the source of collective forms of social resistance and struggle. However, these do not automatically result from individual emotional responses. Only if there are ways to intersubjectively articulate such emotions into a social movement will collective forms of struggle arise. This is what happened in Argentina in 2001: ordinary citizens saw their quality of life immediately affected as a result of what they considered to be mismanagement by the government, and they took to the streets demanding that “they should all go”⁶.

Some reflections on discourse

“A one of its kind, the museum is a place for sheltering and diffusing historical and cultural events that will allow visitors, through reflection, to get near the truth about the existence of Argentina’s foreign debt”, states Simón Pristupín, the driving force of the project and first museum director.

Given the importance of this issue in today’s society and, especially, in the lives of Argentineans, addressing this difficult question becomes a *prima facie* true commitment to the college’s social responsibility.

Still, does the construction of citizenship in the framework of historical memory have one single truth?

It is important to acknowledge that national identity lies at two opposite ends of socio-cultural reality. On the one hand, there’s the public sphere, as a variety of articulated, highly selective discourses constructed from the top through various cultural institutions and agents. And at the bottom of the social structure, there is a form of subjectivity both from individuals and from a range of groups, which

⁴ Held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and sponsored by ICOM Argentina.

⁵ This took place in Brazil during Collor de Melo’s administration.

⁶ People demanded that all the politicians should go.

conveys very diverse feelings, not always accurately depicted by public renderings of them. Their private counterparts, though, are more implicit and contradictory in nature, as well as less articulated than public discourses.

The role of cultural institutions in the construction of different versions of national identity is remarkable, but there is no argument that the state has a great impact on the articulation of the discourses of this identity. This is achieved through the discourse of its own educational and cultural institutions, of the various institutions belonging to it, the communication media it controls, and through the creation or supply of a great deal of the contents and symbols of national identity (LARRAIN 2003).

“We want the Museum of Argentina’s Foreign Debt to allow people to really understand, as clearly as possible, what the foreign debt is and how it originated. In the darkness of ignorance lie the moves that have turned the debt into hunger and poverty”, adds Simón Pristupín.

In this case, the discourse has focused primarily on third parties’ responsibility, namely, former administrations both democratic and non-democratic. Also, it has targeted foreign agents, the creditors, particularly the IMF – which, for all its stigmatization as the source of all evil, owned only 9% of the total amount of our foreign debt. The debt has been cancelled by the present administration, with great speeches leading us to believe that the major creditor was being paid up when in fact it was a minor one. Additionally, Argentina has not stopped being a member of the IMF, and it continues to pay its member fee.

Made-up reality

Beyond exhibition, the museum’s aim is to further clarify this complex issue by featuring a series of cartoons, which make it possible to convey some aspects of reality. Select cultural elements are rendered by the messages into their representations, constituting a discursive whole.

The comic is an autonomous literary genre with its own structural elements and an original communication technique based on the existence of a code shared by the readers, which the author resorts to – following unedited formative rules – in order to articulate a message addressed simultaneously to the intellect, imagination and taste of the readers themselves.

The semantic elements are arranged by means of frame grammar, and the successive relationship among them creates an ideal continuity. Readers connect the elements in their imagination and perceive them as a continuum. It is worth pointing out it has been proved that in the context of a series of framings it is possible to convey an ideological statement relating to the universe of values (Eco 1964).

The comic strips published by the Museum of the Foreign Debt feature the following content:

1. *D.E.U.D.A* (Spanish acronym for: foreign debt, an Argentine Cartoon): based on Alfredo and Eric Calcagno’s book *La deuda externa explicada a todos (los que tienen que pagarla)* (*The foreign debt explained to everyone – who has to pay it*).
2. *An Intruder in the family: 50 years of the Argentina-IMF relationship*: IMF conditionality, stated in its recipes, the complicity of internal sectors from indebted countries, and also some degree of ignorance by others, together with the unlawfulness of the background – evident in the de facto governments –, arise as the thematic cores of such a complex relationship. The IMF is personified as an American intruder “sneaking in” in order to take away all that has been achieved through great sacrifice.⁷

⁷ Argentina’s major creditor is Germany, though, with 30%, followed by Japan and The Netherlands –and the USA ranks number 6.

3. *CANJE: Deuda x Educación (SWAP: Debt x Education)*: This comic explains the procedure of swapping education for debt – a strategy designed by Brazil's and Argentina's Ministers of Education as debtor states, which was timely submitted before the U.N.

4. *D.E.U.D.A. 2: Los Imperios Contraatacan (DEBT 2: The Empires Strike Back)*: It tells the story of Argentina's foreign indebtment from the time the first loan is requested, in 1824, until 1976.



Fig. 3 - The cartoons *It aims at diffusing this issue in an easy, youth-friendly way, An allegory of the relationship between Argentina and the IMF, SWAP: Debt for Education*. Photo: G. Weisinger Cordero, Covers of the magazines

Comics tend to be effective to reach the young or genre fans. However, comics do not use only linguistic terms as signifiers but also iconographic, monosemic elements.

Following Umberto Eco, an image is the indisputable, visible summary of a series of conclusions arrived at through cultural elaboration. In this particular case, the opposite direction has been followed: an image was built, personifying the IMF, and it was decreed guilty of the state of affairs, as if the point were to incorporate that guilt into the cultural background without further objections.

From comics to video

Reading comics posed some limitations, though, since readers need to be familiar with the genre and, on the other hand, it is impossible to tell the story of the indebtment without using long text panels. Inclusiveness seems to be paramount, and TV is the best medium to achieve it since it does not require academic credentials (SARLO 2011). Therefore, this was the chosen tool, and the video was broadcast on the official channel. Thus, the saga *Martians. A Chronology of the Foreign Debt* was produced. Its launch was announced during a speech by the President from the Presidential House,⁸ as a new venue for the museum was inaugurated.

Planet Earth, year 3668. A group of Martians arrives in planet Earth to do research only to find out humans had disappeared 1,400 years before due to a nuclear disaster. However, in the region where Argentina had been – right across from BA's iconic obelisk – they come across an economist who will try to explain to them about another type of 'self-extermination': Argentina's foreign debt. Interspersed with images (live-action, non-animated ones) negative innuendos are stressed through ever-bigger

⁸ It is worth pointing out that both in the video and the comic the unlawfulness of the debt is stressed, but the President made it clear in her speech that her administration does not intend to stop paying. There has been a speech for the people – feisty and revolutionary – and one for the creditors – we will honor our debt timely–, whenever the country's reliability is at stake.

figures of the foreign debt and intertitles such as: *treason, death, greed, lies*. A country turned into ruins because of the foreign debt and the policies implemented by prior administrations. The series comprises six, 25-minute chapters.⁹ It can also be seen in theaters.

The discourse used is that of the above-mentioned comics.



Fig. 4 - Unemployment rate represented by St. Cayetano, patron saint of labor. Photo: *Clarín Newspaper*, www.edant.clarin.com/diario/2005/05/03/conexiones/t-968773.htm

Unidirectional or open discourses?

Does a single discourse which does not enable discernment allow the layman visiting the exhibition to ponder the events from an objective viewpoint? Or does it merely impose an ideological message? May the basic nature of the discourses be considered democratic and anti-elitist?

Over the last few decades we have seen a growing trend to turn a fragment of reality into just enough: from the bare minimum, a universe, and from the universe, something minimal, losing sight of the concept of interdependence and privileging fragment interpretation over a comprehensive concept of the real.



Fig. 5 - Cardboard picker (cartonero): a 'profession' stemming from the severe 2001 crisis. Photo: www.flickr.com/people/dandeluca/



Fig. 6 - Imitation gold artistic representation of a cardboard picker's cart at the museum. Photo: Museum of Argentine Foreign Debt

A partial interpretation of events through some key word or concept – using religious symbols or iconic elements that represent indigence – should not create a false reality but one which leads citizens to engage in a game of interchanges allowing for multiple readings and interpretations, making them committed, democratic, and inquiring individuals.

⁹ The series has been produced by public television, the *Encuentro* Channel (state run) and the Museum of the Foreign Debt, which belongs to UBA's School of Economics.

Let's not forget that discourses aiming at a single, true viewpoint are in fact the most selective and excluding ones: just a few basic traits are selected and many others are disregarded. Their capacity to represent the underlying social and cultural diversity is inevitably limited.



Fig. 7 - Examples of the museum discourse. Photo: G. Weisinger Cordero



Fig. 8 - The museum today. Photo: G. Weisinger Cordero

This is a particular case when citizens, engulfed in an uncertain future, take a crisis as their identity. The process can be seen in the use of explosive language – or iconic one, from comics and videos – as tools for communicating conclusions that should be open enough to enable reflection leading to finding answers. Yet, is “an installation with data and allegories aiming at reminding us that Argentines were not born with the foreign debt tucked under our arms”,¹⁰ really a museum?

¹⁰ DEMARCO 2005.

Whether a museum or an interpretation center,¹¹ it should assume its role as a public place claiming to be a mirror of society reflecting both its positive and negative sides, as a place for interpretation, deliberation and negotiation, as well as a repository of information, resources, etc.

In order to grasp the fluctuations and incidence the issue of Argentina's foreign debt exerts on the country's everyday matters, let's consider that when the abstract of this paper was submitted, in April 2011, the debt amounted to 150 billion dollars. Just three months later, it reached US\$ 173, 147 billion. Historians think that to analyze things with enough objectivity, at least 50 years should go by after the events, so that official records can be accessed, people will have calmed down, and issues will be addressed more impartially and dispassionately. However, in view of the international situation and from the standpoint of a university museum, addressing the issue of nations' indebtment becomes extremely interesting in the quest for a more harmonious world.

A binary logic works by favoring radical trust or distrust, but museology's philosophical basis lies in learning to question by meditating; accepting that no questioning boils down to the terms of what is expressed but, on the contrary, to discovering the 'unexpressed', whether willingly or unwillingly. The 'notions' that are grasped from the unexpressed (not the concepts or ideas that get across immediately) are the richest contribution to an individual. They will be passed on to his/her peers in order to shape unanswered questions. It is in that exchange that communication and diffusion could have a more realistic nature, without resorting to representations with high, instant impact, but low credibility.

Visitors may often disagree with the material on display or feel upset about it, about its content, but if they keep interested in what they see it means they feel respected in terms of the quality of the information they are getting. That can be a very interesting starting point, especially for university museums, which may thus turn into places where debate over major social issues is encouraged.

Although, as its mission well states, this museum wishes to contribute to the construction of citizenship in a historical memory framework, it is important to point out that museum discourses should inquire into the past as the reservoir containing the major elements of our identity. They should also look into the future and aid in the construction of an identity project based on a range of versions of national identity representing various interests, values, and social groups.

It is in nurturing critical thinking that the museum's best reason for existing lies.

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¹¹ ICOM recognizes interpretation centres as museums, provided they do not have a collection, a set of witness objects that enable more than one reading. Is it logical for interpretation centres to be referred to as museums?

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